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GUYANA'S FORESTS FACE UNCERTAIN FUTURE

by Chaitram Aklu

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OTTAWA

GUYANA, IDRC--The local daily newspaper recently carried separate stories about two of Guyana's major timbers - greenheart (Ocotea rodiaei) and purpleheart (Peltogyne spp.). One report stated that experts have recommended that greenheart be banned from local use because it was being misused and was in great demand for export. The other report stated that the purpleheart was in danger of becoming extinct because of over-exploitation.

Although these reports touched on only two species, they did point to a crucial problem in the development of the country's forest resources. The total area of its exploitable forest cover is 140,000 square kilometres, or 65 percent of the country's entire land area of 216,000 sq.km. Out of this area only 36,000 sq.km. is easily accessible, and conversion is taking place at a rate of only about 7000 hectares per year.

These figures show a favourable picture of the present situation. Indeed, when compared with other developing countries, Guyana may appear to be in a fortunate position in terms of its forest resources, virtually all of which fall within the tropical moist forest category.

But, like other developing countries, Guyana is faced with problems of irrational exploitation of its resources, mainly because not enough is known about its forests. At present very few species are in use. Greenheart alone accounts for more than 50 percent of production, while just five other species, including purpleheart, account for another 25 percent.

Professor Paul Richards, of the University of Wales, author of the comprehensive book, *The Tropical Rainforest*, which he researched in Guyana, told the Fifth Commonwealth Conference on Development and Human Ecology in Georgetown: "In Guyana it is common to find over 90 different tree species in a four acre sample....Many of the plants and probably more than half of the smaller animals (insects etc.) in tropical forests are still not scientifically named or described. Of those which have names, there are extremely few of which more is known than their bare names and descriptions."

The situation is worsened by a chronic lack of finance and professional staff, and is compounded by the problem of low priority given to silvicultural research.

These problems manifest themselves in the unscientific exploitation practices engaged in by the loggers because of inadequate supervision in the field. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on the forest industry prepared in 1980 noted that the present method of logging results in haphazard "creaming" of the forest, removing only the most valuable species. The great diversity of the forest poses problems for logging because selected species do not necessarily grow in close proximity to one another: two trees of the same species may be separated by a distance of 500 metres or more.

With the rapid increase in extraction of purpleheart for the export market, this species appears to be under stress in those regions where logging is most intensive. And, like the greenheart, it takes several decades for new trees to grow to maturity.

When fresh the wood is brown, but oxidises quickly to violet purple. It has medium fine texture, straight grain, is very strong and resilient, takes stain well, and polishes beautifully. Because of these qualities, it is in demand for use in building construction, flooring, walls, bridging, and coach building. Presently it is very scarce on the local market. But although the quality of the wood is well known, the danger lies in the fact that not much is known about the tree itself. The trees flower in December and produce fruit in

April. The seeds are small and flat, and because they tend to be eaten by worms when they fall to the forest floor, natural regeneration is difficult.

Some sawmill operators, while agreeing that the species are among the least common in their leases, brush aside the notion that the tree is in danger. They claim that there are plenty more in areas that are not now being exploited, and that complete protection is not needed. They would prefer a ban to be placed on local use only.

The wood is fetching competitive prices on the export market, where it is used mainly for decorative purposes. This is a significant factor, since increased exports bring much-needed foreign exchange into the country. But the choice may soon have to be made whether this tree, as well as the greenheart will continue to be sold to the highest bidder, or whether to treat it as a renewable resource for the benefit of future generations.

One step in the right direction may be to intensify efforts to persuade both local and overseas consumers to make use of other species of hardwoods, and at the same time to assess the volume of timber by preparing a comprehensive inventory of the threatened species. At present the loggers do not keep inventories. Loggers, sawmillers, and others need to be educated so that they come to appreciate that the only way to safeguard the industry's future is carefully to plan and execute the extraction of forest products.

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